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Exploring the experiences of estranged students in higher education: A longitudinal comparative case study of two UK universities

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Exploring the experiences of estranged students in higher education: A longitudinal comparative case study of two UK universities

Higher education (HE) policy in the UK emphasises a widening participation agenda and a shift to focus on a ‘student’s entire lifecycle’ rather than simply on access to HE. Universities are expected to accommodate for ‘non-traditional’ students, and a well-established field of research explores the experiences of these student groups. ‘Estranged students’, those who study without family support, are a group whose experiences are slowly becoming acknowledged in policy and research. This paper discusses the existing knowledge of how estranged students experience HE, arguing that it views estranged students as a homogeneous group and fails to identify complexities in experience. The paper discusses the author’s attempts to address this issue, identifying the key findings of her small-scale undergraduate dissertation project, and outlining plans to conduct a longitudinal comparative case study of estranged students at two universities. Ultimately, these projects aim to improve estranged students’ experiences of HE.

Keywords: higher education; estranged students; non-traditional students; widening participation

Introduction

In UK higher education (HE) policy, there is an emphasis on the widening participation (WP) agenda, which aims to give anyone ‘an equal opportunity to participate and succeed’ in HE, regardless of their background (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2014, p. 7). Policy outlines that universities are expected to accommodate for students from ‘non-traditional’ social class, ethnic, and gender backgrounds (Office for Fair Access [OFFA], 2017). Traditionally, WP policies have focused on widening access to HE, potentially leaving some students unsupported once they have entered HE (Boliver, 2018). To tackle this, policies increasingly reference the ‘student experience’ as a whole (Universities UK, 2016) and WP encompasses the ‘student’s entire lifecycle’ (BIS, 2014, p. 9). There exists a well-established field of academic research which explores the experiences of ‘non-traditional’ student groups across their HE journeys (Meuleman et al., 2014; Taylor & Scurry, 2011).

One group of students whose experiences are slowly becoming acknowledged in policy and research are ‘estranged students’. These students are defined as having ‘no communicative relationship’ with their parents (OFFA, 2018) and make up 1.6% of the undergraduate student population (Stand Alone & UNITE, 2015). While their family background is comparable to that of care leavers, estranged students have not typically had any intervention from the care system and do not have access to the corporate parenting support care leavers receive. Research into estranged students’ experiences of HE is currently limited. Existing work identifies a range of challenges faced by students without a family support network in finance, accommodation, and mental health, increasing their risk of withdrawing from HE (Stand Alone & UNITE, 2015). This paper will explore the existing knowledge of how estranged students experience HE and argue that much of the literature views estranged students as a homogeneous group and fails to identify the complexities in, and varieties of, students’ experiences. The paper will then discuss my attempts to address the gaps in the research and improve estranged students’ experiences of HE; I will identify the key findings of my small-scale undergraduate dissertation research and outline my plans for a longitudinal comparative case study lasting one year.

Family estrangement

A range of academic literature examines the types of family estrangement, its impacts, and reasons for its occurrence (Blake, 2017), yet the term lacks a standard conceptualisation. Some view estrangement as an explicit ‘choice’ initiated by a family member (Agllias, 2017b; Carr et al., 2015), while others view it as a ‘communicative process’ family members actively maintain (Scharp et al., 2015). Whichever definition is used, estrangement removes one’s access to the ‘bed-rock’ of financial, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Winter, 2000). Belonging to a family is seen as non-voluntary (Hess, 2000), and the family unit has become ‘a privilege instituted into a universal norm’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 22). A cultural emphasis on reconciliation of family breakdown, rather than acceptance, results in a stigma associated with family estrangement (Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Stand Alone, a UK charity, has worked to increase awareness of, and support for, those experiencing estrangement, but find that 68% of their

beneficiaries still feel their family circumstances are stigmatised (Stand Alone & Blake, 2015).

Estranged students in higher education

The UK's HE sector is family-oriented on a national and institutional level in its discourse and expectations of students. The student finance application process asks students under the age of 25 to provide information of their parents' income, expecting families to use their financial capital to 'complement' statutory support (Antonucci, 2016; Brooks, 2016). Estranged students, who cannot provide these details, are expected to provide 'evidence' to prove that they are 'permanently' estranged from their parents, complicating the process to access economic capital (Student Finance England, 2016). Institutions also assume that students have traditional family backgrounds, as accommodation contracts often expect students to return to the family home during vacation periods (Bland, 2018).

Research conducted into the everyday experiences of estranged students is currently limited to that conducted by Stand Alone (2015; & Blake, 2015; & UNITE, 2015; Bland, 2018). Primarily quantitative, their research identifies the challenges that estranged students face and the number of students who experience that barrier. Themes that arise in this research include finance, accommodation, mental health, and outreach. Such barriers can threaten a student's retention and increase their chances of withdrawing from the institution (Tinto, 1993): 41% of estranged students consider dropping out of university and 14% do, which is much higher than the national rate of 5.7% (Bland, 2018). To tackle these challenges, HE providers are encouraged to sign the Stand Alone Pledge, a public commitment to providing support for estranged students in these four areas (Stand Alone, 2018a). In September 2018, 50 institutions across the UK signed the Stand Alone Pledge (Stand Alone, 2018b), increasing the number of estranged students across the country who receive support.

Expanding the research field: my undergraduate dissertation

The quantitative nature of the existing research runs the risk of suggesting that 'estranged students' are a homogeneous group who face the same challenges which fit neatly into a

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category of, for example, ‘finance’. It fails to explore the ways that issues may interact, intersect, and complicate the experiences of individuals. Research has been conducted in this vein for other ‘non-traditional’ student groups – Harrison (2017) has researched care leavers, and Archer et al. (2003) have researched working-class students – but estranged students are left comparatively unexamined. To begin to address this gap, I conducted a small-scale qualitative research project for my undergraduate dissertation. The study aimed to explore the challenges that estranged students faced, the support they accessed, and the ways they thought this support could be improved. It compared student experiences whilst amplifying the varieties of experience for individuals. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with six estranged students at universities in England, allowing students to talk about the aspects they viewed as most significant to them. The participant demographics are available in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant demographics. A tick in the University Pledged column means the student’s university has signed the Stand Alone Pledge.

Name	Age	Course	Course Year	University Location	University Pledged	Interview Method
Lauren	26	Counselling	2 nd	North	✓	Email
Yoda	20	Law	2 nd	Midlands	✓	Email
Jessica	20	Social Work	1 st	South		Phone
Erica	23	Politics & Sociology	2 nd	Midlands	✓	Skype
Jodie	22	Nursing	2 nd	North	✓	Email
Stephen	24	Linguistics	1 st	North		Phone

The themes identified by students in this project align with those found in previous research into estranged students’ experiences of HE. Financially, all students had accessed the maximum student loan but had faced difficulties when doing so, with some finding the process “very distressing” (Lauren). They also identified their dissimilarity to peers financially as they were unable to access the family’s “safety blanket” of economic capital (Yoda). These financial

difficulties made affording accommodation difficult for many of the students; for example, Erica had to take risks and choose between paying for her accommodation deposit or her train ticket to university. The nature of accommodation contracts also created instability for estranged students which was “unsettling” for some (Erica). As they lacked the emotional capital from the family, most of the students experienced isolation and wished “I had someone to call or visit” (Jessica). However, some students such as Yoda chose not to dwell on the negative consequences of their estrangement but found that it had strengthened their independence.

To cope with these difficulties, all participants had accessed support from their university. They had all received either a tailored bursary or hardship fund from their institution to support their finances, but as this support was not guaranteed each year students worried about their future financial situation. Financial support was often needed to afford accommodation. One participant, Lauren, only managed to access support after she had experienced homelessness, suggesting that support may come too late for some students. Students commonly accessed emotional support through counselling or student support teams. They particularly valued being put in contact with “other people experiencing the same thing as you” to help reduce feelings of isolation (Jessica). Peers became an important support network for the students, becoming “the family I have chosen” for some (Lauren).

While my undergraduate dissertation provided a much-needed qualitative lens through which we can view estranged students’ experiences of HE, it came with some limitations. Students were asked to reflect in one moment on their entire university experience, failing to consider that their perceptions may change as they progress through the student lifecycle. The remainder of this paper will outline plans for a future research project which will follow students over time to provide a narrative of their experiences across a year.

Expanding the research field: my proposed research

From September 2019, I will conduct a longitudinal comparative case study of 12 estranged students at two universities for a 12-month period. The two universities will consist of one which has signed the Stand Alone Pledge and another which has not. The study will use

narrative methods of inquiry to understand how students' perceptions change throughout the year. A Bourdieusian theoretical framework of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) will be used to analyse how these perceptions change as they progress through their university lifecycle. The research will be supervised by Dr Rille Raaper and Professor Vikki Boliver (Durham University), in collaboration with Stand Alone.

The primary research question is 'How do estranged students experience higher education in different university settings?', divided into the following sub-questions:

- (1) How do estranged students perceive themselves as students and their experiences of higher education in the two universities?
- (2) How is the Stand Alone Pledge implemented in policy and practice at the institution?
- (3) What support mechanisms are available to students in the two universities?
- (4) To what extent does student experience differ between an institution that signed the Stand Alone Pledge, and an institution that did not?

I will conduct a review of a wide range of academic literature on student experiences of HE and family estrangement, followed by an analysis of policy documents to examine how estranged students are constructed in national and institutional policy. I will work closely with my supervisors and Stand Alone to select two universities and six students from each institution. Participants will be second-year, non-mature students who self-define as estranged from their parents, recruited with the assistance of the universities and Stand Alone.

Narrative methods of inquiry will be used with the participants, allowing estranged students to express their student experiences as personal stories (Huber et al., 2013; Weiler & Middleton, 1999). Three semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) will be conducted with each student, and students will be encouraged to write online diary entries (Alaszewski, 2006) at least once a month, which will be used to guide the future interviews. Participants will be provided initial suggestions of what to write about, but they will be encouraged to write about their experiences 'in their own words' (Corti, 1993). Narrative analysis (Reissman, 1993) will be used, drawing on procedures from content analysis and

structural analysis, using codes from the literature review and a Bourdieusian framework of capital.

The nature of family estrangement means that participants may feel vulnerable when discussing their experiences, and may experience grief, shame, or stigma (Agllias, 2017a). My own position as an estranged student means that I have experienced many of the issues myself, placing me at an advantage for developing rapport and not further stigmatising estranged students (Liamputtong, 2007). However, this positionality puts me at risk of stepping outside of my role as a researcher if I identify with issues. The supervisory team for this project, including the charity Stand Alone, will be able to support me in maintaining a professional position throughout the research.

The proposed research will address research gaps in the fields of student experiences and family estrangement, adding a longitudinal perspective of students' voices. It aims to inform policy decision-making for a range of stakeholders, including Stand Alone, HE institutions, the NUS, and UK government. The greatest practical value will come for the participating institutions, allowing them to directly influence their provisions. Ultimately, this research will work to improve estranged students' experiences of HE by recognising the complexities and individualities in experience.

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